Heart of Darkness in Contemporary English

Joseph Conrad.

Adaptation by
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by Laurent Sueur

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CHAPTER I.

The Nellie, a yawl, was at anchor. It was gently swinging; the sails were almost sleeping. There were no waves. The breeze embraced the ship lovingly. Since it was in the very middle of the river, it could not easily reach the shore and had therefore to wait for the high tide.

The sea reach of the Thames stretched before us; it looked like an endless waterway. Opalescent vapors linked the sea with the sky. The suntanned sails of the barges, which were drifting downstream, seemed to be bound to a forest of spars that were gleaming under an evanescent sun. The mist shrouded the lower banks, which disappeared in the distance. Dark fumes were devouring Gravesend. Farther back, the heart of the biggest and greatest city on earth palpitated dolefully.

The director of the company was our captain and our host. The four of us were looking at his back while he was examining the sea from the bow. This scene was so nautical. He resembled a pilot, a person whom the seamen regard as the embodiment of trustworthiness. It was difficult to understand that his work was not out there

in the gleaming estuary but behind him, in the threatening gloom.

We all shared the same love for the sea. This enabled us to stand long periods of separation and made us tolerate the past and believes of the crew. The lawyer, a nice chap, had, because of his age and virtues, the only cushion on the deck and the only blanket too. The accountant had brought a domino set; he was trying to build a house with the ivory pieces. Marlow sat cross-legged at the end of the boat; he leaned his back against the mizzenmast. He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, and a rigid posture. His stiffness made him resemble a statue. The director, satisfied with the mooring, walked along the ship’s rail and sat down among us. We talked for a while, then we fell silent. For some reason or other, we did not play dominoes. We were lost in thought. Our eyes were staring placidly at the exquisite brilliance of the sunset. The water scintillated gently. The ethereal sky was pierced by glowing arrows. The mist over the Essex marshes was like a shiny gauzy fabric hanging from the wooded hills; its diaphanous folds shrouded the lower banks. The west gloom that was slowly eating the scenery turned purplish: the presence of the sun angered it.

At last, the sun reached the end of its daily stroll. The glowing sphere removed its reddish beams and plunged into the burning water of its chastity, as if it wanted to hide from the gloomy gazes of a group of men.

Something suddenly happened: the serenity faded. The peaceful old river that served the people who inhabited its banks started to spread out nervously the canal which led to the antipodes. We all looked at the venerable stream and remembered our glorious predecessors. It is easy for a sailor who has been crossing the oceans for years to feel the great spirit of the past when he looks at the Thames. The tidal current keeps on mixing memories of ships and men it has sent home or to the fury of the water. It knew and served famous seafarers, like Francis Drake and John Franklin, and many other knights errant. It carried away ships whose names are sparkling diamonds that bring back memories: the Golden Hind, returning with its big belly full of treasures, and the Erebus and Terror, which were bound to discover other territories and never came back. It was acquainted with those ships and men. Those adventurers and settlers were from Deptford, Greenwich, Erith: they were not the crème de la crème but gold-seekers and fame hunters. They had already sailed on that river, bearing a sword or a torch; they were the messengers of the

inland might, Vestal Virgins gazing at the sacred fire lovingly. The wildest dreams of man were born on those shores. Hadn't the Thames begotten the greatest empire on earth?

The sun disappeared; dusk shrouded the river; small lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman lighthouse, a three-legged iron spider erected on a mudflat, started to blink. Luminous ships were dancing in the distance. Farther west, on the hills, the spot where stood the megalopolis emitted a lurid light that threatened the stars.

'And this also', said Marlow suddenly, 'was one of the darkest places on earth.'

He was the only one among us who was a real sailor. The worst that could be said about him was that he did not look the part. He was a seaman and a wanderer, whereas most seamen lead, dare I say it, a sedentary life. Their minds are moored to their homes, the ship, and their country: the sea. Ships look alike; the sea remains the same. In the immutability of their surroundings, the far-off shores, the foreign faces and the shadowy immensity of life pass, veiled not by a sense of mystery but by disdainful ignorance, for a seafarer doesn't find anything mysterious, except the sea, his unpredictable mistress.

For the rest, a stroll or a shopping spree on shore, after his work, enables him to understand a whole continent and discover what he should ignore. Sea stories are crystal clear: you hardly need to open the walnut to know the end. As for Marlow, the meaning of an episode was not in the shell but outside. It enveloped the tale like a halo that reveals the truth thanks to the awareness of the observer.

His remark was not surprising at all, since he always spoke in that fashion. It was accepted in silence. No one dared to grunt. Then he said:

‘I was thinking of ancient times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago. The other day... I saw light on the surface of the Thames. You say knights? Yes, but it was like a flame going through a plain quickly, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in twilight… may it last as long as the Earth keeps spinning! But there was not a speck of light yesterday. Imagine what would feel the commander of a fine -what’s the name?- trireme, who would head north, sail his boat along Gaul, and bark at his legionaries, who were skillful people who, according to what I read, used to build coliseums in a month or two. Imagine him here, at the very end of the world, on a sea of lead, under a grey sky, on

a ship almost as rigid as barbwire and that goes upstream, looking at the stores, the buildings, or whatever. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, starvation, and nothing to drink but the barbaric water of the Thames. There is no Falernian wine here, and you cannot go ashore. Sometimes you can see a military camp lost in the very middle of nowhere, some snow, the fog, a tempest, diseases, solitude and death, death skulking in the air, in the water, and under the bushes. Many Romans must have died there… He did it, he did it very well, no doubt, and without thinking much about it, except afterwards, when he boasted about what he had suffered. His men were courageous enough to face the darkness. Perhaps he was cheered by a possible promotion that would have made him become the admiral of the fleet of Ravenna, if he had had good friends in Rome and had survived the awful climate of Britannia. Picture a young citizen wearing a toga, following a prefect, a tax collector or a merchant in order to earn his living. He disembarks in a swamp, walks through forests, and feels as if he were besieged by savagery: the mysterious, frightening sounds which turn wildlife into the fearful echo of wild men’s hearts. There is no initiation into those mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the unknown, which is unpleasant. Moreover, he is fascinated by abominations:

regrets, his desire to escape or surrender, disgust, and hatred.'

He paused.

'I guess', he went on, raising his arms and turning his hands outward, which, together with his legs crossed, made him look like a European Buddha, 'that none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency… the devotion to efficiency. But those people were not important, really. They were not colonists; their administration was hardly visible. They were conquerors, violent men who defeated weak enemies, nothing to be proud of. They took what they found, stole and killed mercilessly. When you look back on the history of mankind, you soon understand that the conquest of the world was just a theft committed by men who stole the land from people who had a different complexion or a flatter nose than theirs… Ideas will redeem the world, great ideas, strong beliefs to follow and revere, not sentimental excuses…'

He broke off. Multicolored flames were bouncing on the surface of the water. The restlessness of the big city reflected off the sleepless river. We looked up. There was nothing else to do but wait for the end of the flood. After a long silence, he said hesitantly: 'Folks, I suppose that you remember that I

once sailed on this river.' At that very moment, we knew that we were about to hear one of Marlow's dull stories.

'I don't want to bore you with my adventures', said he, which meant that most storytellers are bad since, most of the time, they don't pay attention to what their audience would like to hear, 'however, so that you may understand the Thames, you must know how I went upstream and found the place where I met the poor fellow. It was a far-off destination, the most enthralling moment of my trip. It enlightened me. It was somber… pitiful, too… extraordinarily ordinary... not very clear. No, not very clear. However, it enlightened me.'

As you remember, I had just returned to London after a long period of time spent in the Far East… six years or so! I loafed around; I bothered you; I invaded your homes as if God had ordered me to civilize you. At the beginning, it was fine, but, after a while, it became annoying. I thus began to look for a ship… What an idea! To be a sailor is such a dangerous job. Anyway, the ships did not even look at me. I lost interest in that game too.

When I was a little boy, I loved geography. I used to look for hours at maps of South America, Africa, and Australia; I

pictured myself being a fearless explorer. At that time, there were many blank spaces on the Earth; when I saw one that was particularly alluring, I set my finger on it and said: ‘Someday I will go there.’ I remember that he North Pole was one of those destinations. Well, I haven't been there yet, and I won’t try to go there now, for it is not very glamorous. Other places stood near the equator. I visited some of them, and, well, … I won't talk about that. But there was one yet… the biggest one, a gigantic one that mesmerized me.

Back then, it was not a blank space anymore: there were rivers, lakes, and names. Even though it was not a terra incognita, it was still a place of darkness. The map showed a big river; it resembled an immense snake with its head in the sea, its body undulating over a vast territory, and its tail lost in the depths of the forest. I saw the map in a shop window: I was like a silly little bird in front of a rattlesnake. I remember that there was a big problem: a company which operated along the river. I thought that they had steamboats, and I wanted to be in charge of one of them. I went down Fleet Street; I kept on thinking of the river: the snake had bewitched me.

That company was a continental issue… Most of my friends live on the continent

because it's cheap and not as horrible as it looks, according to them.

I worried them. This was a fresh start for me. You see, I never behaved that way. I used to manage on my own. I wouldn't have believed it, but, then… you see… I wanted to go there by hook or by crook. So, I worried them. The men said to me: ‘My dear fellow’; but they did not help me. So, I tried with the women. Can you believe it? I, Charles Marlow, asked women to get me a job! My aunt, an enthusiastic soul, wrote: “It will be fine. I will do all I can to help you. It is a very good idea. I know the wife of an influential politician.” She was determined to move heaven and earth to enable me to become the skipper of a steamboat.

I got the job, of course, and I got it quickly. Actually, the head of the company heard that one of his captains had been killed in a scuffle with the natives. Lucky me! It made me all the more anxious to accept the offer. Many months afterwards, when I tried to recover the remains, I learned that the quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens. Fresleven, this Danish man’s name, believed that he had been fooled. So he went ashore and started to beat the village chief with a stick. The story did not surprise me. At the same time, they told me that Fresleven was

the nicest and most peaceful creature that ever walked on two legs. There is no doubt about it. However, he had been sailing on that river for a couple of years: he probably needed to assert himself. He thus caned the black man mercilessly. Thunderstruck, many people watched him until the chief's son, outraged by the scene, jabbed at the white man with a spear. Of course, the projectile stuck in his back, between the shoulder blades. Then the inhabitants hid in the forest for fear of reprisals. As for the crew members, they also panicked. Before my arrival, nobody seemed to care about Fresleven's remains. I honestly could not turn a blind eye to their selfishness. When, at last, I was given the opportunity to meet my predecessor, the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones. They were all there. The supernatural white man had not been touched after his death. The village had been deserted by the villagers; the cabins were rotting within the broken enclosure. There had been a calamity. They had vanished. Terror had made them flee; men, women and children had done a bunk and had never come back. What had become of the hens? I don't know. I suppose that progress had caught them. However, thanks to this exceptional circumstances, I got a job in the blink of an eye.

I made haste to get ready. It only took me forty-eight hours to cross the Channel, meet my employers and sign the contract. I thus arrived in a city filled with crooks. I found the head office easily: everybody in London knew what was already a big company. They were on the verge of becoming a multinational, a money-machine.

I saw a narrow dark silent deserted street, big buildings, a sea of windows with Venetian blinds, grass sprouting between the stones of the pavement, imposing carriage archways, and immense double doors left ajar. I slipped through one of those openings; I beheld a clean bare staircase that was as boring as the desert. I climbed the stairs and opened the first door that I reached. Two women (one fat, one slim), seated on rush chairs, were knitting, using black wool. The slim one stood up; she walked right at me without raising her eyes from her knitting. When I started to move aside in order to avoid the collision, she stopped dead and looked up. Her dress was as plain as an umbrella canopy. She turned around without uttering a word and led me to the waiting-room. I gave my name and looked around. A cheap table stood in the middle of the room. Very ordinary chairs were lined up along the walls. A large map showed many red spots -a good thing since one knows that red is the color of completed work- a lot of blue spots,

a bit of green, a few smears of orange, and, along the East Coast, a purple patch which delimited the place where the jolly promoters of progress drank high-spirited lager. However, those colors did not interest me, for I would depart for the yellow spot in the middle of the map. The river was there, fascinating, as dangerous as a snake. A door opened; a white-haired secretarial head with a compassionate expression appeared; a small forefinger beckoned me to proceed. So I entered the sanctuary. The light was dim; a heavy desk hardly hid a potbellied whiteness wearing a frock coat: the great man himself. I think that he was five feet six inches tall. He handled millions of pounds from that room. He shook hands with me, murmured, and was satisfied with my French.

Forty-five seconds later, I was in the waiting-room again with the compassionate secretary, who made me sign some documents; she looked worried. I think that I promised them that I would not disclose any trade secret. Well, I won’t.

I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know, I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the air. It looked like a conspiracy… I don't know, something weird. I was happy to exit. In the first room, the two women were knitting feverishly. People kept arriving; the younger

one was pacing the room, introducing them to the boss. The old one was seated on a chair. Her flat fabric slippers were leaning against a foot stove; a cat was sleeping on her lap. She was wearing a white starched hat and silver-rimmed spectacles. There was a wart on her cheek. She looked at me above her glasses. The swiftness and placidity of that gaze troubled me. Two smiling youngsters were chatting: she cast the same unemotional glance. She seemed to know us very well. How bizarre! She looked so weird. I often recall those two women guarding the entrance to a world of darkness, knitting something with black yarn, one introducing people to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the innocent smiling faces, hiding her emotionless old eyes behind glasses. Madam, those who are about to die salute you! Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again...

I had to see the doctor. 'A mere legal formality', according to the secretary, who seemed to sympathize with me. Hence, a young man wearing his hat over his left eyebrow, a clerk, I suppose -there must have been clerks in this company even though the building was as silent as the grave- went downstairs and led me to another room. He was badly dressed and dirty: there were ink stains on the sleeves of his jacket. His large tie was waving under a chin that resembled

the heel of a boot. The doctor was not there yet. So I suggested having a drink, which made him smile. We sat at the table; I poured us a glass of vermouth; he started to praise the company. Eventually, I told him that I did not understand why he did not go out there. He answered me quietly and sententiously: ‘I am not as stupid as I look, said Plato to his disciples.’ He emptied his glass rapidly and we rose to our feet.

The old doctor felt my pulse absently. ‘Good, good for that place’, he mumbled. Then he eagerly asked me whether I would allow him to measure my head. I was surprised, but I answered him that I agreed on it. He thus used calipers to measure it accurately; he wrote mysterious pictographs on a piece of paper. This unshaven, short man wore a worn-out raincoat and slippers. I thought him harmless. ‘In the interests of science, I always ask permission to measure the skull of those who go there,’ said he. ‘When they come back, do you do the same thing?’, I asked. ‘Oh, I never see them then,’ he answered; ‘besides, the changes take place inside, you know.’ He smiled imperceptibly. ‘So you are going there. A famous place. An interesting one too.’ He looked at me again and wrote a few words on his paper. ‘Are there lunatics in your family?’, he asked casually. The question annoyed me. ‘I suppose it is in the interests

of science too?' 'Yes, of course', said he without taking notice of my irritation, 'It is always interesting to watch the mental changes of people, but...' 'Are you a psychiatrist?', I interrupted. 'All physicians should be psychiatrists or, at least, know the subject a little,' answered that old eccentric, calmly. 'I have got a theory which I must prove thanks to the men who go there. This will enable my country to maximise the profits it will get from such a magnificent dependency; this will be my humble contribution to future generations. I was quite intrusive, but you are the first Englishman that I see here...' I told him that I was not a typical Brit; 'If I were one', said I, 'I wouldn't be talking like this with you.' 'What you are saying is true and false at the same time', he said, laughing. 'Avoid irritation more than exposure to the sun. Farewell, my friend! In the tropics, one must keep calm...' He raised a bombastic forefinger and added: 'Self-control. Farewell.'

I had one last thing to do: say good-by to my caring aunt. She was overjoyed at 'my success'. In her old-fashioned sitting room, next to the fireplace, we had a cup of tea and talked for hours. I soon realized that she had told the wife of the influential politician, and maybe many other people, that I was an exceptional and gifted creature, a godsend, a

rarity. Good heavens! I was going to take charge of a cheap steamboat and blow a tin whistle! However, I was more than a worker: I was the emissary of light, a kind of sub-apostle. They had said and printed many lies about that company and that place, which had led the good old lady to believe that there was no smoke without fire. Hence, she suggested ‘sequestrating this dirty money’, which made me feel quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the company’s *raison d’être* was to make money.

‘Dear Charles, you forget that the worker is worth more than this’, she said brightly. Women don’t like to face the truth. They are on another planet. It is poetical and unrealistic. Men’s objectivity keeps on opposing their reveries.

Then she kissed me, told me to wear warm clothes and write to her often. I left the old-fashioned apartment. In the street, I don't know why, I suddenly felt as if I were an impostor. It was a very strange feeling, for I usually set off for any part of the world at short notice, without turning a hair, and, this time, I almost hesitated. For a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the center of a continent, I were about to set off for the center of the Earth.

I boarded a French steamer which entered all the bloody harbours of the west coast so that soldiers and customs officers might disembark. I observed the coast. To watch a coast as it slips by a ship is like to think about an enigma. It smiles, frowns, simpers, winks at you, sulks, makes faces and barks, but never speaks to you. It's up to you to 'come and find out the truth'. This grim coast was almost featureless, as if it were still in the making. The edge of a massive dark jungle that was fringed with foam ran along the sea; its bluish brightness was blurred by the mist. The impertinent sun was heating the earth, which seemed to glisten and perspire profusely. Here and there, with a flag waving above them perhaps, gray specks showed up, dancing in the water. Ageless small villages were sleeping. We drove along the coast and stopped; soldiers and customs officers disembarked. They were there to levy taxes in what looked like a God-forsaken spot with a metal shed and a flagpole lost in it. More soldiers disembarked in order to protect the customs officers. I heard that some of them drowned, which did not upset anybody. They were just sent to feed the beast. Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved, but we passed various places, trading posts, whose names were *Gran' Bassam* or *Little Popo* and seemed to belong to some sordid play performed in front of a

sinister grand drape. The idleness of a passenger, my crowded solitude, the glassy sea and the permanent gloom over the coast kept me from understanding the very meaning of things. I liked to listen to the breathing of the sea; it resembled the consoling words of a brother. It was something natural, meaningful, reasonable. At times a boat coming from the shore enabled us, for a short while, to reconnect us with reality. It was paddled by black men. We could see their shining eyes from afar. They shouted; they sang; they sweated. Their faces looked like Mardi Gras masks; their bones and muscles swung smoothly. They were happy to be there; we were happy to see them. I thought that I still belonged to a world of straightforward facts; the feeling did not last long! Something scared it away. I remember that once we came upon a frigate anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and the boat was bombing the seafront. The French were at war in this part of the world. Its ensign dropped softly; the muzzles of the long eight-inch guns jutted out from the hull; the sticky swell swung it lazily. The skies, the water, and the vertiginous immensity of the Earth turned it into an incongruity. A nutshell cannot fire at a continent! Eight-inch guns are toys: they spit smoky illusions out. It was insane, all the more so because no one on board could assure me that there was a group of natives,

of enemies as they say, waiting in ambush on shore.

We gave the mail to the captain of the frigate; then we left. I heard that, on that lonely ship, three men died of fever every day. We arrived at some more places with stupid names, places where death and trade waltzed lugubriously. Along the threatening coast, desperate rivers vomited putrid mud that silted up the panic-stricken mangroves: they seemed to ask us to help them. We never stopped long enough to get to know a place; we were just bedazzled and frightened by what was passing in front of us. It was like a tiring pilgrimage to a land of confusion.

It was nearly thirty days before I saw the mouth of the big river. We stopped near the seat of government, but my job would start two hundred miles upstream. So, as soon as I could, I set off for that place.

I boarded a little steamer. The captain was a Swede; he allowed me to be on the bridge when he saw that I was a seaman. He was a sad skinny young man. He walked very slowly. His long blond hair floated on the breeze. When the boat started to move away from the quay, he looked at the governor's mansion resentfully and said: ‘Did you stay there?’ I answered: ‘Yes.’ ‘Those civil

servants are strange birds. They would do anything for money. I wonder what happens to those guys when they go inland?' I told him that I was about to see that. 'Well!', he exclaimed, shuffling from side to side while keeping an eye on the manoeuvre, 'The other day, I transported a man who hanged himself during the journey. He was Swedish too.' 'He hanged himself! Why, did he do that?', I cried. The captain kept looking at the river. 'Who knows? The sun or the country perhaps!'

A rocky cliff appeared. I beheld mounds of earth and houses on a hill: some of them had a metal roof. The noise of the rapids hovered over this solitary shanty town. A lot of people, mainly naked black people, were moving like restless ants looking for food. A jetty projected into the river. At times, the adamant sun covered the scene with a blinding light. 'This is your company's station', said the Swede, pointing at three cabins situated on the hill. 'I will send someone to carry your belongings. Four boxes did you say? So, good-bye, sir.'

I came upon an engine lying in the grass; then I found a pathway leading uphill. I went past a boulder and caught sight of a small control car that was upside down. One wheel was missing. It looked like a dead animal. I went past other pieces of

machinery that were out of order and a pile of rusty rails. To the left, a clump of trees hardly shaded dark things that were moving slightly. I blinked. The pathway was steep. A horn tooted to the right; I saw the black people run. A big explosion shook the ground; smoke came out of the cliff; the rock face did not crack. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way. This aimless blast seemed to be the only thing they did on that day.

A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men in a single file were walking slowly along the pathway; they were carrying small baskets full of dirt on their heads; the ringing kept time with their footsteps. They were wearing black rags which were wrapped around their waists; a piece of fabric was swinging behind: it looked like a tail. I could see their ribs, their knotty joints, the iron collars, and the plaintive chains. Another blast coming from the cliff made me think about the warship I had seen defying a continent. It was the same ominous sound. By no stretch of the imagination could these men be called enemies. The Europeans called them criminals, for they broke the European laws which they did not know and came from nowhere and were supported by cannons firing at a different civilization. The black men panted; their nostrils quivered; their

eyes stared uphill. They passed me, but they did not look at me: their sorrows rendered them indifferent. Behind them, there was a black soldier. He was holding a rifle and shuffling his feet along the pathway. A button had fallen off his jacket. When he saw that there was a white man on the path, he rapidly put his rifle on his shoulder. He was cautious because all white men look the same: seen from afar, I was but a white threat. He soon perceived that the man was benign; he thus smiled at me and relaxed. After all, I also belonged to this noble enterprise.

I did not go up; I turned and went down the other side of the hill, for I did not want to see that chain gang. You know, I am not an emotional man; my life is a struggle, which compels me to fight back or even attack without regard for the collateral damage: sentimentality is not in my vocabulary. I know what violence, greed and desire mean, but those chained creatures resembled the Devil. I had a peek at them and foresaw my future: a perverted liaison with colonial madness. I knew that several months later and a thousand miles farther I would drain the cup of vice to the dregs. I froze; I had heard a biblical warning; I was about to become a pillar of salt. I went downhill and headed towards the trees I had seen earlier.

I walked around a large hole someone had dug in the hillside for no apparent reason. It was neither a limestone quarry nor a sandpit but a hollow. I guess that it had something to do with some good-hearted people's desire to provide those criminals with a useful occupation. Then I almost fell into a narrow ravine which was hardly visible. I discovered that they had put broken drainpipes there. What a mess! At last I reached the trees. I wanted to walk in the shade for a moment. I thus shielded myself from the sun and entered a mysterious hell. All the leaves grimaced at me; I jumped with fright; the branches bit me; I screamed with pain; the rapids insulted me; I hid my face in my hands, and there was the earth: it was trembling.

Black figures crouched down, crawled, sat between the trees, leaned against the trunks, and clung to the earth. Their twisted bodies revealed their suffering. Another mine exploded; my feet slightly shook. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the workers had come to die.

They were dying slowly. They were not enemies. they were not criminals, they were not human beings anymore. They were distorted shadows that were starving, burning, expiring in the greenish gloom.

They came from coastal villages. They had signed a temporary contract. They lived in unhealthy surroundings, ate adulterated food, got sick, could not work any more, and were allowed to take a rest. These emaciated specters were as free and intangible as the air. From where I stood, I could see their feverish eyes. One of them looked at me: he was a young man, a boy, actually. I had a Swedish biscuit in my pocket; I gave it to him. He grasped it gently and stopped moving. He had a piece of wool fabric tied around his neck. Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge, a trinket, a lucky charm, or a propitiatory object? Did it serve any purpose? It looked so weird around his neck.

There were two other men near the same tree. The first one rested his chin on his knees and closed his eyes. The second one leaned his head against the tree. They were surrounded by reclining figures; this looked like a mass grave. I was horrified. One of the figures rose and went to the river to drink. It lapped the water from its hand; then it sat up; a few minutes later, it slumped to the ground.

This hellish apparition compelled me to flee. I soon reached the company’s station; I met a well-dressed white man who was wearing a starched collar, white cuffs, an alpaca jacket, white trousers, a white tie and

patent leather boots. He was not wearing a hat. His shiny hair had been neatly combed. A green parasol protected him from the sun. He had a pen behind his ear. He looked stunning.

I shook hands with him. I learned that he was the company's chief accountant and that the bookkeeping was done here. He told me that he was taking a break in order to get a breath of fresh air. His sentence sounded weird: we were not in London but in the jungle, it was not tea-time, and we were not going to eat buttered scones. However, thanks to him, I heard the name of the man who is so indissolubly connected with the memories of that time. Moreover, he impressed me. Yes, I was fascinated by his collar, his cuffs, and his shiny hair. Of course, he looked like a shop-window dummy, but, at least, he tried to keep up appearances, though he lived in the very middle of nowhere. His chichi outfit was a kind of statement. He had been living there for nearly three years and I could not help asking him how he managed to be so well-dressed every day. He blushed and said: ‘I taught one of the natives how to clean my clothes. It was hard. She didn’t like doing it.’ It was clear that this man was a talented educator. Besides, he took care of the company’s books.

Everything else at the company's station was a mess. The black employees kept arriving and departing. Loads of manufactured goods (cheap cotton fabric, glass beads, copper wire) were dispatched to the jungle in exchange for precious tusks.

I had to stay there for ten days, which seemed like an eternity. I lived in a cabin, but I spent a lot of time with the accountant in order to avoid the noise and the chaos. His office was poorly built. The sunlight passed through the cracks in the walls. Hence, we did not need to open the window to see. It was hot there too. Big flies kept buzzing; they did not sting: they just bit. I usually sat on the floor while the dandy who smelt good sat on a stool and wrote. Sometimes he stood up to stretch his legs. When a sick employee was taken back to the station and put on a camp bed in his office, he grumbled. He said: 'The sick keep groaning, which distracts attention from work. Besides, it is difficult to stay focused because of the heat.'

On one occasion, he said to me: 'In the forest, you will probably meet Mr. Kurtz.' When I asked him who he was, he answered that he was a dedicated worker. He realized that I was not convinced; he put down his pen and added that he was a remarkable person. Actually, Mr. Kurtz was in charge of

an important trading post located in the very heart of the jungle; he found as much ivory as all the other employees put together. The accountant resumed writing. The man on the camp bed was too sick to groan. The flies continued buzzing peacefully.

Then I heard voices and footsteps: a caravan had arrived and the black workers were talking loudly. The boss exclaimed: ‘for God's sake, be more careful!’ The accountant rose to his feet. ‘There’s too much noise!', he exclaimed. He came up to the sick man and said to me: ‘He cannot hear them.’ ‘Is he dead?’, I asked. ‘No, not yet’, he answered calmly. He looked through the window and murmured: ‘How can I work with that noise? I hate those savages; I really hate them!’ He thought for a few seconds and went on: 'When you see Mr. Kurtz, tell him that everything is alright here. You see, I don’t like to write to him. Here, because of these guys, letters can fall into the wrong hands.’ He stared at me for a moment. ‘Oh, he will go far’, said he; ‘he will be an important man in the company someday. The directors know it.’

He went back to work. The noise had stopped. I headed towards the door and looked back. The flies were buzzing. The sick agent was motionless. The accountant was examining the books carefully; he was

checking the figures. Fifty feet away, I could see the black men who were dying underneath the trees.

On the following day, I joined a caravan, composed of sixty men, in order to undertake a two-hundred-mile journey.

I don’t want to go into details. However, you must realize that it was a maze of pathways, a journey to solitude: we did not see anybody, not even a single hut. The inhabitants had left a long time ago. If a lot of mysterious black men holding terrifying weapons were to start walking along the road from Deal to Gravesend in order to force the peasants to carry heavy loads all over the place, I suppose that they would abandon their cottages too. Here their houses had vanished into thin air. We nonetheless passed through several ghost villages; the cabins resembled broken dollhouses. We walked for many days on end. Sixty pairs of bare feet were behind me; each pair carried a sixty-pound load. All we did was pitch the tents, cook, sleep, strike camp and march. Sometimes we came across a corpse in chains lying in the grass, next to an empty water flask and a stick. Everything was quiet. At night, we could hear drums in the distance. This strange sound mesmerized me: it reminded me of the bells that ask the wandering souls to go to

church. On one occasion, we met a white man wearing a uniform; he had unbuttoned his jacket. He camped near the path and commanded a small group of armed black men. They were drunk. The white man told me that his job was to take care of the road. I did not see any road; the only think to take care of was a middle-aged black man who was lying on the pathway three miles farther. There was another white man in the caravan; he was a nice chap even though he was fat and kept fainting because of the unbearable heat. I don’t really like to hold my jacket over a man who has passed out. I couldn't help asking him why he was here. ‘To make money, of course’, he retorted. Then he had a fever and had to be carried by porters, who kept complaining about the ‘fat white elephant’. They grouched and ran away in the middle of the night. So I scolded them. The following day, I put the hammock and the fat man down in front of them. An hour later, I found the hammock, the blankets and the angry fat man lying in the bushes. The pole had left a nick on his nose. He wanted me to kill one of them, but they had already run away. I remembered what the old doctor had said to me: ‘It is always interesting to watch the mental changes of people.’ I felt as if I were becoming a laboratory rat. On the fifteenth day, I caught sight of the big river and hobbled over to the station. It was surrounded by a smelly mud

wall and a shabby picket fence. There was no gate but a hole. It was self-evident that the place was ran by a lazy man. White men holding cudgels appeared, looked at me and left. One of them, a restless fat man with a black mustache, turned pale when I told him that I was the captain of the steamer. He started to stammer and finally said that my boat had sunk. I was thunderstruck. I asked why. 'Everything is alright', he answered; 'the manager is here. Everybody did a great job. You must go and see him. He's waiting for you.'

I did not understand why the ship had sunk. I know the whys and wherefores now. The affair was too stupid to be an accident. At that time, it was just a last-minute hitch. Two days earlier, the boat was going upstream when it suddenly hit a rock at high speed. At first, I didn't know what to do since the boat was 'out of order'. Then I realized that I had to refloat it. On the following day, I started to organize this project: it would take a lot of time to complete it.

The first talk I had with the manager was curious. He didn't tell me to sit down even though I was visibly exhausted. He was an ordinary man. His blue eyes used to look daggers at troublesome people, which does not mean that he was unpleasant. An inconspicuous smile made him look

mysterious. It appeared at the end of his speeches and confused the issue. He had worked as a trader his whole life. The men obeyed him; they neither like him nor fear him. He made everyone feel uncomfortable. This is a very effective trick. He was disorganized; the messy station reflected his state of mind. He was neither intelligent nor educated. How did he get that job? Maybe because he had a strong constitution. He had spent three years in that country and was always in good health, which was considered a miracle. When he went on leave, he had a night on the tiles. He was not an original thinker; he just kept the business going. He was a great man because it was impossible to tell what motivated him. He never revealed this secret. Perhaps there was no secret, no reason, nothing at all. That thought was scary, for there was no counter-power: he was an unchallenged autocrat. On one occasion, almost all the employees suffered from diarrhea; he said: ‘The men who come to work here, should leave their bowels in Europe.’ He smirked; nobody appreciated his ‘witty remark’. Since the white men kept arguing about dinning etiquette, he had had a small house built and a big round table placed inside. This pavilion was the station's mess hall. Wherever he sat was the head of the table; the other spots did not matter: everybody knew that. He was neither friendly nor unfriendly, he just

remained silent while eating. He was served by a plump young black man who was allowed to address the white employees disrespectfully.

He started to speak as soon as he saw me. I was exhausted, but he did not care. He had to talk to me immediately, for the situation was serious. The inland stations needed food, water and equipment. He did not know who was still alive and how the survivors handled the problem. He did not listen to what I said; he crushed a stick of sealing wax and repeated that the situation was serious. It was rumoured that Mr. Kurtz's station was in jeopardy and that he was hill. He Hoped it was not true, for Mr. Kurtz was... Anyway, I was tired and upset; Kurtz could go to hell. I added that someone had told me that he was on the coast. 'Ah! So they talk about him down there', he murmured. Then he repeated that Mr. Kurtz was the best agent he had so that I might understand why he was worried. Actually, he wanted me to refloat the boat as soon as possible. I interrupted him again. I was hungry and hadn't been asked to sit down; I was getting impatient. 'You know, sir', said I, 'I haven't seen the wreck yet. It is clear that it will take quite some time to complete the task.' This conversation seemed so pointless. 'Some time?', he inquired. 'Well, let's say three months. Yes, three months.' I left the

pavilion and said to myself that he was a stupid idiot. Then I changed my mind when he estimated the delays accurately.

I went to work the following day and tried to ignore all those problems in order to remain serene. However, reality is adamant; I looked around and saw lazy employees chat, stroll and sunbathe. It was absurd. They bummed around like devilish creatures besieged by their own vices. All they talked about was ivory. Those sinners worshiped the ivory calf! The macabre vapors of greed stank out the whole place. I had never seen anything so unreal in my life. Outside, the silent barbarity of the jungle tried to frighten me. Evil and truth waited in ambush.

Three months elapsed. On one occasion, a shed full of cotton fabric and cheap jewellery caught on fire. The flames consumed all that trash in the blink of an eye. I was smoking my pipe, next to the wreck, when I saw them run around the shed. The fat man with the black moustache rushed to the river, holding a tin bucket with a hole in it; he told me that everything was alright. He filled his bucket with water and rushed to the fire.

I headed towards the barn. There was no hurry, for the situation was hopeless. The convoluted flames wanted to lasso all the

spectators. The shed was already a pile of embers. A black man was being beaten nearby. They said that it was he who had set fire to the barn. He was squealing like a stuck pig. I saw him several days later: he looked awful. He went away on tiptoe. The primeval forest winked at him; he succumbed to darkness. As I got close to the fire, I heard two men talk about Kurtz. They did not want to ‘take advantage of this unfortunate accident.’ One of the men was the manager. I said hello to him. ‘Did you ever see anything like that? It’s unbelievable’, he said; then he left. The other man stayed there. He was a reserved, polite young employee with a forked beard and a hooked nose. He did not socialize with the other employees. As for them, they believed that he was the manager's spy. I had never spoken to him before. We started talking and moved away from the fire. He asked me to follow him to his bedroom; it was located in the main building. He lit a match; I saw that this young aristocrat had a silver-mounted dressing case and a candle. In those days, the manager was the only person allowed to own candles. The walls were covered with rush mats; this humble interior was decorated with spears, assegais, shields and knives. He was a brickmaker, but there weren’t any bricks anywhere in the station, and he had been there for more than a year. It seemed that he could not make

bricks because of a missing element: straw, clay, or something of the sort. He was thus waiting for someone to send him the material. I guess that the European providers did not ship goods to this part of the world. Actually, all the employees were waiting for something, which was not a bad job. They never received anything; they just got sick! They killed time speaking ill of people. There was an atmosphere of suspicion at the station, which led nowhere. It was as unreal as everything else here: their so-called philanthropy, their meetings, their government, their work. The only real thing here was their desire to be assigned to a trading post, where there was a lot of ivory, so that they might make more money. That was why they kept plotting against one another and did not have time to work. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark! A society cannot allow some people to steal a horse and, at the same time, forbid the witnesses to shout: 'Stop, thief!'

At first, I did not know why he was so friendly. Then I realized that he was trying to pump information out of me. As a matter of fact, he kept alluding to my acquaintances in London. His inquisitive little eyes sparkled even though he tried to keep his cool. I was surprised. Then I wondered what kind of information would interest him. He was looking for something that had never

existed: my mind was filled with boat parts, not with secrets. He believed that I was a liar. His yawns did not really hide the fact that he was upset. I rose to my feet and noticed a small painting showing a blindfolded woman carrying a torch. The background was almost black. Her posture was divine, but the dim light made her resemble a witch.

I stopped and looked at it. He positioned himself next to me, holding an empty bottle of Champagne with a candle stuck in its neck. He told me that Mr. Kurtz had painted it more than a year ago, when he had stayed here. 'Tell me about Mr. Kurtz', I said

'He is the chief of the inner station,' he replied quickly, looking away. 'Thank you,' I said, laughing; 'and you are the brickmaker of the Central Station. Everybody knows that.' He fell silent. Then he said: 'He is wonderful. He is an ardent defender of pity, science, progress and so many other good things. We need a mentor, an intelligent man like him.' 'Who says that?', I asked. 'Many people', he replied; 'they even write that. So he came here. He is a great man, you know.' 'No, I don't know yet', I interrupted. He did not pay attention to my remark. 'Yes, today he is in charge of the best station; next year, he will be assistant manager, and in two

years… but you know what he will be in two years' time. You are a member of the same new gang: the righteous men's gang; people who sent him and you here. You can't deny it. I have my sources!' My dear aunt's influential acquaintances were producing an unexpected effect on that young man. I smiled and asked: 'Do you read the company's confidential mail?' He did not answer. It was funny. 'When Mr. Kurtz is general manager', I said seriously, 'you won't be allowed to be so inquisitive.'

He blew out the candle and we exited. The moon had risen. Black figures were pouring water on the ashes; hissing fumes were ascending into the phosphorescent skies; the black man who had been beaten was groaning. 'What an awful din!', exclaimed the energetic man with the black mustache. 'It serves him right! He transgressed a rule; he is being punished. We cannot be permissive. Whipping is an efficient procedure; it will prevent him from behaving badly in the future. That's what I said to the boss...' He noticed the brickmaker and remarked: 'You are not in bed yet. I suppose that you can't sleep because of the noise.' And he walked away. We headed towards the river. I heard shouts. 'Inborn cretins', said a voice. The white men were visibly upset; they were running around like headless chickens. Some of

them were holding a stick; I think that they slept with it. The haughty forest was speechless with consternation. This unusual silence was impressive, all the more so because the nocturnal animals always howl at the moon. The beaten man moaned; I jumped with fright and walked away. A hand slid under my arm. ‘My dear sir,’ said the brickmaker, ‘I don’t want you to misunderstand me, especially since you will see Mr. Kurtz very soon. I don’t want him to get the wrong idea about me.’

‘I did not interrupt him. He looked like a carnival puppet depicting the Devil. He was just an ugly shell full of dirt. He wanted to become the assistant to the current manager. Both of them did not want to meet Kurtz. He talked too fast; I did not try to stop him. I was leaning against my steamboat’s hull. It resembled the skeleton of a whale. It smelled of mud. I gazed at the silent, motionless forest. The silver moon illuminated the trees, the ground, and the river. This mute scenery was great. The brickmaker kept talking to himself. I wondered whether the silence of the forest was a good or a bad thing. Were we strong enough to resist this monster? It was gigantic, mute and deaf. What did it conceal? Ivory and Mr. Kurtz, of course. They had told me so many things about the jungle. However, it meant nothing to me. It was as

real as the existence of inhabitants on planet Mars. I once met a Scottish man who believed that martians existed. When you asked him what they looked like and how they acted, he blushed and muttered: ‘they walk on all fours.’ This old man used to punch those who snickered. I wouldn’t have fought for Kurtz, but I almost lied for his sake. I hate lies, not because I am more honest than everyone else, but because they dismay me. Actually, they are as frightening as death. Lying is like biting into a poisoned apple. I nonetheless let the brickmaker believe that I knew big shots in England. like the others, I was a fraud. In my defense, I lied because I thought it would help Kurtz, a man I did not know at that time. His name was an hypothesis and his persona an improbability. By the bye, can you picture him? Can you follow me? Do you understand the story? It seems that I am describing a dream. Isn’t it stupid? It’s impossible to express the absurdity, the confusion, the chthonic revolt, the thrill of being bewildered by oddity...’

Marlow was silent for a while.

‘No, it’s impossible to describe someone else’s dreams, for our dreams belong to us: they only make sense to us.’

He paused again in order to concentrate. Then he added: ‘Of course, it is easier for your to understand this, especially because you know me.’

The sky was so dark that we could hardly see one another. Marlow was nothing but a voice. The others were sleeping. As for me, I was listening to him, waiting for the sentence that would enable me to understand why this story coming from the depths of the forest made me feel dizzy.

‘Yes’, said Marlow, ‘I let the brickmaker talk and think whatever he wanted about my so-called friends at court.’ He kept talking about ‘the necessity for every man to get by in life.’ He added: ‘you don’t come here to sit around and twiddle your thumbs.’ According to him, Mr. Kurtz was a ‘genius’, but even geniuses need appropriate tools, that is to say intelligent men. He didn’t make bricks because he didn’t have the right materials. He gathered information in order to get on the right side of the manager. I understood his point of view, and I did not care, for my main concern was to find rivets so that I might patch the hole in the steamboat. There were boxes full of rivets on the coast; there were so many rivets that you stepped on them when you walked in the courtyard of the coastal station. Here there were none left. I could use metal plates, but

it was impossible to fasten them to the hull. Every week a messenger left for the coast with my written request in his bag. Several times a week, a caravan from the coast brought ugly fabric, trinkets and cotton handkerchiefs; I never saw a rivet in this pile of junk. Three men could have carried what I needed to fix the boat.

My poker face irritated him. He told me that he did not fear anything. I answered that his bad mood did not help me. He pouted and started to talk about a hippopotamus. He wondered whether it bothered me when I was asleep (I was on my boat night and day). This old hippopotamus used to come out of the water at night in order to wander around. The white men shot at him. It was a waste of time. ‘That animal leads a charmed life’, he said; ‘animals are blessed here; human beings aren’t.’ He stood there for a moment. The moonlight illuminated his hooked noise and his inquisitorial eyes. He said goodnight and walked away. He looked puzzled, which was not a bad thing. I turned my attention to my influential friend: the battered steamboat. I clambered aboard. It resounded like an empty cookie tin hurtling along a street. It was cheaply built and ugly, but I had spent so much time working on it that I had fallen in love with it. No influential friend would

have done more for me than it did. It had enabled me to come here and find myself.

I caught sight of a man who was sitting on the deck with his legs dangling over the hull. You see, I had made friends with a few mechanics even though the other employees despised them on account of their bad manners, I suppose. This man was the chief mechanic, a boilermaker by trade and a good worker. He was a lanky man with a yellow face and big eyes. He always looked worried. He was completely bald, but he had a long beard. This widower had left his six young children in England in order to come here. His sister took care of them. He kept talking about them and pigeon racing, which was his ruling passion. At work, when he had to crawl through the mud under the steamboat, he tied up his beard in loops over his ears, using a white napkin. At night, he washed it carefully in the river; then he placed it solemnly on a bush so that it might dry.

I slapped him on the back and shouted: ‘We will soon receive rivets!’ Surprised, he jumped to his feet and exclaimed: ‘Rivets: that can’t be true!’ Then he whispered: ‘You…’ I nodded in agreement and murmured: ‘Yes, I…’ He clapped his hands, snapped his fingers and tapped his heels. I started to dance. The noise might have awakened some of the white men. The

manager closed the door of his cabin. We stopped dancing. Everything got quiet. We were facing the emerald sea, which longed to devour us. We heard snorts and splashes: was an ichthyosaur swimming in the river? ‘After all’, said the boilermaker, ‘why shouldn’t we get the rivets?’ ‘They will arrive in three weeks,’ I predicted.

Unfortunately, they did not arrive. Instead, for three weeks the trading post was invaded by caravans led by well-dressed white men mounted on donkeys. They waved at us. A group of boisterous black porters followed the donkeys; they carried tents, campstools, tin boxes, white cases, and brown bales; we were taken aback. The five caravans that we saw reminded me of *Ali Baba and the forty thieves*. It was a sea of sundry objects en route for the bewitching cave.

This expedition was called the Gold Cruise. Those ‘explorers’ had sworn one another to secrecy. They looked like foolish, careless, cruel and greedy pirates. They did not know that the world economy needed their merchandise. They just wanted to pillage the natural resources of the planet. The leader of that gang of thieves was our manager’s uncle.

He resembled a butcher from the East End; he must have been the brother of Jack the Ripper! He displayed his big belly as elegantly as a simple-minded turkey. This short man didn’t talk to anyone but his nephew.

I stopped worrying about the rivets. As a matter of fact, my expectations were inopportune. I forgot them in order to focus on the ‘Kurtz issue’. I wasn’t fascinated by him. However, I was eager to see whether this righteous man would get promoted and what he would do afterward.

CHAPTER II.

One evening, as I was lying on the deck of my steamboat, I heard the voices of the manager and his uncle. They were strolling along the river. Suddenly, the manager said: ‘I am as harmless as a child, but I don’t like to be told what to do. I’m the manager, right? They ordered me to send him there. It’s unbelievable!’ I realized that they were near my boat, just below my head. I did not move, for I was exhausted. ‘It’s unpleasant’, grunted the uncle. ‘He asked them to be sent there,’ said the manager, ‘because he wants to show off. They told me to help him. He has a lot of influence. It’s scary, isn’t it?’ They agreed that it was scary. I did not quite catch the next sentence; it said: ‘Rule the roost… one man… the council… around his little finger...’ Their conversation woke me up. I was thus able to hear the uncle say: ‘The climate may solve your problems. Is he alone out there?’ ‘Yes, he is’, answered the manager; ‘he sent his assistant to my station with a note which said: “Get rid of this stupid idiot and, please, don’t try to help me. It is better to be alone than in bad company.” That was more than a year ago. He is so careless!’ ‘Have you heard from him since then?’, inquired the uncle. ‘He keeps sending ivory’, retorted the manager, ‘a lot of high-

quality ivory. And he never forgets the invoice.' They were talking about Kurtz.

I was wide awake and did not need to move since I was comfortably lying on the deck. 'How did he proceed?', asked the uncle angrily. The manager explained that the ivory had been put in canoes; a clerk commanded the flotilla. Kurtz wanted to go with them, but, after three hundred miles, he decided to return to his station. He took four paddlers and let the clerk and the ivory go down the river. The manager and his uncle were amazed by Kurtz's boldness. They did not really understand his demeanor. As for me, I did not know him yet. I pictured him turning his back on the headquarters and paddling smoothly to his empty station and the unsophisticated virgin forest. I didn't know why he did that. Perhaps he was just a good man who did his job. They hadn't said his name; they called him 'that man.' They referred to the clerk, who had completed a dangerous journey, as 'that scoundrel.' The 'scoundrel' had reported that the 'man' had been very sick and was still a bit indisposed. The two men below me took a few steps backward. I heard: 'Military post… doctor… two hundred miles… quite alone now… unavoidable delays… nine months… no news… strange rumors.' They drew near to my boat; the manager said: '… no one, as far as I know... a trafficker stealing ivory from

the natives.' Whom were they talking about now? I deduced that they were referring to a man whom the manager did not like and who was in Kurtz's district. 'We will keep undergoing unfair competition if we don't hang one of those men as an example,' he said. 'You are right', grunted the other. 'Hang him, Why not? You can do anything you want in this country. Nobody here can defy you, for you can stand the climate while they go down like ninepins. The problems comes from Europe, but before I left I...' They moved away; however, their voices rose again. 'You can't fault me for the delays: I did my best', exclaimed the manager. 'When he was here, he patronized me. He kept saying that each station should be a beacon of progress and a school that would educate the natives and turn them into better individuals. Can you believe it? What a jackass! And he wants to become a manager! No, it's...' He was too angry to continue. I looked up and saw that they were next to me. I could have touched their hats. Lost in thought, they were looking at the ground. The manager stamped his foot in anger. His uncle asked: 'Have you been sick recently?' His nephew jumped and exclaimed: 'No, I haven't. I am in good health. But the others, gosh, they are all sick! They die so quickly that I don't have time to send them to Europe. It's unbelievable.' 'Well', grunted the uncle, 'trust this'; and he pointed at the

forest, the creek, the mud, and the river. Was he beckoning the evil spirits over so that they might take the souls away? I rose to my feet, turned around and pricked up my ears: the forest did not answer the question. I am a bit silly sometimes. The motionless jungle looked daggers at us.

They jumped with fright and swore. They did not know that I was there. Then they returned to the station. The sun was setting; their shadows stretched behind them: they looked ridiculous.

A few days later, the Gold Cruise penetrated the barbaric forest. Most of the donkeys died. I never heard anything about the less valuable animals. I suppose that, like the rest of us, they got what they deserved. I didn’t ask. I was excited about the possibility of meeting Kurtz very soon, that is to say before two months.

This journey was a time travel: we were heading towards the beginning of the world, when the vegetation covered everything. We sailed up a deserted river that hardly disturbed the silent stillness of the forest. The air was warm, thick and heavy. The dim light prevented us from seeing very far. Some hippopotamuses and crocodiles sunned themselves on the sand banks. The river was a maze adorned with wooded

islands. We often lost our way. The boat kept getting stuck on sandbars. We were confused, for this river did nor resemble our gentle European waterways. Sometimes I gazed at the exotic plants and remembered the manicured English gardens: I could not believe that I was in the midst of an invincible ocean of plants. The stillness all around us was not peaceful. It was the lull before the storm. Silence looked at us resentfully. Anyway, I didn't have time to think about my past, for I had to steer the boat, find the right way and avoid the obstacles. I learned to grit my teeth when the boat passed a rock that would tear the hull apart and drown us all. My eyes scanned the river in search of driftwood we would cut, let dry, and use to heat the water of the steam engine. When you have to pay attention to those things, you forget the rest. However, I sensed an invisible force that spied on me, a force that keeps a watch on the seamen who twirl around in the rigging for a penny and a glass of rum.

'Marlow, we earn our bread ant butter by any means whatsoever', growled a voice; I realized that there was at least one person who was listening to my story.

Sorry, I forgot that life is not a bed of roses. Besides, you do well. And I did well too since I did not sink the ship. It is a

miracle that I did it. I was like a blind man driving a carriage on a bad road. I kept sweating and shivering. After all, scraping the bottom of a boat on rocks is a sailor's sin. I should keep this to myself, but I just can't forget the distressful sound: it's like being hit on the heart. You never forget it; you dream about it; you wake with a start every night. The steamboat did not float all the time. Sometimes twenty black men pushed it through the reeds. We had recruited them on the way. I guess that they were cannibals, nice cannibals. I liked to work with them. Moreover, I did no see them eat human beings but meat. They had brought hippopotamus flesh along; it rotted. I remember very well the stench of this exotic delicacy. The manager and four employees were on board. Sometimes we came across small trading posts; the white men who lived there waved at us frantically; they looked like prisoners held captive by a spell. They kept talking about ivory; we hardly listened to them and soon left them in their vices. The leafy giants, neatly lined up, overshadowed the nutshell and the insects that steered it. We were so small, so lost. We kept crawling along the banks, but we did not know where we were going to. To a place where we would find something or someone: Kurtz, for instance. The steam pipes started leaking; we slowed down. The river shrank behind us in order to prevent us from

escaping. We headed towards the heart of darkness. The forest did not dare to whisper. However, we heard man's laments: drums vociferating in the distance. We couldn't tell what they meant. The sunrise shut them up. The woodcutter's campfires crackled peacefully. A twig that snapped startled us. We were exploring a prehistoric planet. We, hunter-gatherers, were taking possession of the unpromised land. All of a sudden, we saw fences, thatched roofs, and black people yelling, clapping, and dancing. Those prehistoric creatures were cursing us, praying to us or welcoming us; we couldn't tell. We did not understand this place. We sailed past the village like fearful ghosts fleeing from a riot in a lunatic asylum. We could not understand this world because we had gone too far. We did not know the history of mankind and we were crossing the dawn of humanity.

The earth seemed unreal. We are used to looking at monsters in chains, but, there, the monsters were free! It was unreal and the men were... no, they were not barbaric. They howled, leaped, spun around and made faces, but we knew that they were human beings and that there was a link between us and their grunts. That noise was ugly, but it was not meaningless and could be understood by humans. Were we human enough to understand them? Man's mind can

do anything, for it contains everything: the past, the future, and human nature. After all, what did we see? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, courage, rage, fury, truth, and the undisputed truth. Let the fools be stunned and frightened to death. Real men can look at them without blinking. They can use their inner strength to acknowledge the truth. Bourgeois morality won't help them; it is a pair of spectacles that distorts reality. No, you need raison to judge people. I must admit that those furious rhythms had beguiled me. However, an inner voice kept drowning out the drums. Of course, fools are always safe, for they never dare to get too close to a possible danger. Are you laughing? Do you want to know whether I went ashore to howl and dance? Well, I didn't: I was busy steering, fixing the leaky steam pipes and watching the native who operated the boiler. Looking at him was like seeing a dog wearing short trousers and a feathered hat and walking on its hind legs. A few months of training had turned him into a skilled worker. He kept an eye on the steam gauge and the water gauge. He had filed teeth, strange patterns cut in his hair and three ornamental scars on each cheek. He should have been dancing on the riverbank, but, instead, he was working on board, bewitched by knowledge and technology. He was useful because he had been trained. He knew that if the water in the glass thingummy

disappeared, the evil spirit that dwelt inside would get thirsty and angry and would seek revenge. So he stoked the fire, sweated, watched the gauge fearfully, and touched his amulets nervously, which were rags tied to his arm and a lip plate. We were heading towards Kurtz. The engine's cough kept us awake. So did the hidden rocks and the sandbars. We didn't have time to daydream.

Fifty miles from the inner station, we came upon a hut. A leaning pole, a tattered flag and a neat stack of firewood stood in front of the door. We came ashore. We found a slate on the firewood. I read: 'Wood for you. Hurry up. Don't make noise' There was a signature, but it was illegible. It wasn't Kurtz's, for it was too long. 'Hurry up.' Why? 'Don't make noise.' The engine was quite noisy. The warning did not refer to this place. There was a problem at the inner station. But what? That was the question. This telegraphic style was stupid. We looked around: the trees prevented us from seeing very far. A ragged red curtain was floating on the breeze. The hut was shabby and dirty, but we could see that a white man had lived there not so long ago. There were a trestle table and a pile of trash in a corner. I picked up a book. The first page was missing; fingerprints had dirtied the pages, but the white binding was new and clean. What a find! The title was: *A Treatise on practical*

seamanship. It had been written by a naval officer called Tower, Towson, or something like that. This big sixty-year-old book was full of diagrams and figures. I handled this antique with care. The author described the ropes, the chains, the pipes and so many other things in minute detail. It wasn't a very exciting book. However, this industrious professional had been able to clarify complicated scientific ideas. This book made me forget the jungle, the company, its employees, and my fears. Someone had written words in code in the margins. We were in the middle of nowhere and a man had gone to the trouble of hiding his thoughts! What a strange demeanor!

I heard a noise; I looked up: the firewood had vanished into thin air! I turned around: the manager and the white employees were on the boat; they beckoned me over. I slipped the book into my pocket: it was like leaving an old friend.

I started the engine. 'It must be that bloody intruder', exclaimed the manager, looking back at the hut. 'He must be English,' I said. 'It won't protect him if he's not careful,' muttered the manager. I then said a truism about the illusion of safety.

The current was getting stronger; the steamboat was panting; the helm was

shaking; I expected the ship to break down at any moment. However, it kept moving! I tried to estimate its speed by watching the trees, but I am not patient enough to focus my eyes on blurry objects. The manager was quiet. I wondered whether I would talk with Kurtz in private. I realized that it didn't matter. After all, I wasn't the manager. Besides, I could hardly understand what was going on.

The following day, we figured that we were about eight miles from Kurtz's station. I wanted us to move forward; the manager told me that it would be too dangerous in the dark. He pointed out that, according to the mysterious warning, it was a dangerous place. Hence, we needed the sunlight to see the traps. His remark made sense. It would take us three hours to go eight miles, and there were strange little waves on the surface of the water. This delay annoyed me even though an extra night did not make any difference. Since we had plenty of wood and were trying to be careful, I stopped the boat in the middle of the river. It was narrow; the banks were high. The moon was hiding behind the clouds. We could barely hear the river's whispers. The trees did not want to sway. I was dreaming. Around three o'clock in the morning, a big fish leaped: the sound startled me. When the sun rose, a thick fog blanketed the valley. Around eight or nine, it

lifted. We caught a fleeting glimpse of the petrified trees, the oppressive jungle, and the opalescent sun. Then the fog came down again. I ordered the crew to pay out the chain. A terrifying creaking followed by a clamor broke the silence. It gave me gooseflesh. Had the mist yelled? Then we heard a few shrieks. We froze. ‘Good Lord! What was that?’, asked a potbellied, little man in pink pajamas. Two other employees, open-mouthed, rushed into the cabin and came back with rifles. All we could see was our ship and a narrow strip of water surrounding it. The rest of the world had disappeared. We were alone with our ghostly solitude.

I ordered the men to grasp the chain in order to be ready to weigh anchor in case we had to leave hurriedly. ‘Will they attack?’, whispered a frightened voice. ‘In this fog, we will be massacred,’ murmured another one. The white men turned pale. The black men did not react and continued working: they lived only eight hundred miles away, the forest was their home. Some of them exchanged a few words and smiled. Their headman, an athletic young fellow, was standing near me. ‘Aha!,’ said I in order to try to be friendly. ‘Catch him,’ said he, displaying his sharp teeth and his bloodshot eyes, ‘catch him and give him to us.’ ‘What would you do with him?’, I asked. ‘Eat him’,

he retorted, resting his elbows on the rail and staring at the fog. I would have never handed a man over to them. I nonetheless understood that they were hungry. They came from the dawn of humanity, had a poor sense of time and did not understand what a six-month contract meant. Nobody on board had pondered how those men would live. Of course, they had brought a lot of hippopotamus flesh along, but the white crew members had thrown much of it away because of the smell. It was an overreaction, but it is impossible to smell rotten meat all day long and remain sane. Each of them received twenty-seven inches of brass wire every week; we thought that they would go ashore and trade that for food in the villages we passed. That did not happen, for there were no villages, or the villagers were hostile, or the manager did not want to stop the boat. Like the rest of us, he ate canned food and, sometimes, a piece of lamb (there were a few of them on board). So unless they ate the wire or used it to fish, I don't know what benefit they derived from their stupid wages. I must admit that they were paid regularly, as if we were in a famous, big company. However, I saw them eat small amounts of a thing that looked like half-cooked blue dough; it was not really tasty. They kept it wrapped in leaves. I don't understand how they could survive and why they did not kill us in order to eat us. They

outnumbered us by six to one; they were bold and strong even though they were a bit weak because of hunger. Did a mysterious drive prevent them from devouring us? This piqued my curiosity. I longed to know their instincts, motives, abilities, and weaknesses in the face of adversity. Why did not they try to eat us? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear, or primal worship? No fear can stand up to hunger; patience cannot be that patient; you are never disgusted when you are hungry. As for superstition, beliefs and principles, they don't matter when you confront starvation. Do you know how you feel when you are starving? I do. It weakens you and makes you feel dizzy. It's easier to face a bereavement, dishonor, or damnation than to face prolonged hunger. Sad but true! These men were unscrupulous. Actually, I expected hyenas prowling through a meadow after a battle to restrain themselves. However, the fact was irrefutable. I did not understand it, but it was as real as the terrible screams we had heard through the whiteness of the fog.

Two crewmen squabbled over the localization of the sounds. The manager, who was behind me, said: 'This is very serious. I don't want anything to happen to Mr. Kurtz before we arrive.' I looked at him and felt certain that he was lying. He was the sort of man who wanted to keep up appearances.

When he muttered something about sailing on, I didn't answer him. We both knew that it was impossible. If we weighed anchor, we would get lost and wouldn't be able to tell whether we were going upstream or downstream. I did nothing, of course. I did not feel like sinking the boat: it was a terrible place for a shipwreck. Either way we would certainly die. 'I allow you to take any risks necessary,' he said. 'I refuse to take any,' I retorted, which was the answer he expected even though the tone surprised him. 'Well, you must be right', he continued, 'after all, you're the captain'. I nodded and looked at the fog. How long would it last? The situation was hopeless. I felt as if I were a sissy prince charming fighting dragons along the road that led to the ivory tower occupied by the pretty lady. Was Kurtz the Sleeping Beauty? 'Do you think they will attack?', asked the manager.

I didn't think they would attack. First, the fog was too thick; if they tried to use their canoes, they would get lost immediately. Secondly, there were no canoes underneath the bushes. Thirdly, the screams we had heard were not hostile; actually, they were rather sad. For some reason, the sight of our boat had filled the savages with grief. Hence, there was a danger: we were close to instincts, sorrow and rage.

The employees looked at me in bewilderment. They believed that I was crazy. I thus lectured them. I told them that I was not a shortsighted lookout. Like a cat watching a mouse, I had been patient enough to wait for a fogless interval and see that there were no canoes hidden behind the bushes. Hence, even though what I was saying was strange, it was the revealed truth. What happened later (an attack) was but a defensive reaction. It could not be regarded as an act of aggression, for it aimed to protect them from intruders.

It happened about two hours after the fog lifted, a mile and a half downriver from Kurtz's station. We neared a bend; I saw a small grassy island in the middle of the river. As a matter of fact, it was the end of a chain of sandy islet. We could see the bottom right under the water, just like you can see a man's spine under his skin. I could go to the right or to the left. The banks looked the same on either side; the depth was the same. Since Kurtz's station was on the west side of the river, I took the western route.

No sooner had we entered the channel than I realized that it was really narrow. We stood between the shoal and a steep bank covered with thick bushes. Above them, gigantic trees stretched their branches toward the water. It was late afternoon; the

forest was falling asleep; a long shadow was trying to swallow the river. The boat sailed very slowly. I kept it near the shore since the water was deeper there.

One of my hungry friends was talking to himself. The steamboat resembled a scow. There were two small cabins on the deck, with doors and windows. The boiler was at the front of the ship; the engine room was on the right side. A light roof pierced by a funnel protected us from the sun. The pilot house stood in front of the funnel. Inside, there was a couch, two stools, a loaded gun, a small table, and the steering wheel. The cabin had a wide door and shuttered windows that I always kept open. I spent my days looking out of the window. At night, I tried to sleep on the couch. The helmsman was an athletic black man who belonged to one of the tribes from the coast; he had been trained by my predecessor. He wore brass earrings and a long blue skirt. He was a raving lunatic. When you were near him, he steered the ship with a swagger; when he was alone, he got hysterical and lost control of the boat.

The water got shallower and shallower. All of a sudden, the poleman stopped measuring the depth of the river in order to lie down on the deck. He didn’t bother to haul the pole out of the water; he just let it

drag behind him. Then I saw the boilerman sit down in front of the boiler and lower his head. I was quite surprised. I looked ahead: I saw little sticks whizz past and land on the deck. The river, the shore and the forest were completely quiet. All I could hear was the sound of the paddlewheel and of those little sticks. I bent down to pick up a stick: it was an arrow! We were being shot at! I rushed into my cabin and closed the shutters. The stupid helmsman had his hands on the wheel; he was stamping and champing like a horse. What an idiot! And we were less than ten feet from the riverbank. I leaned out of the window to close the shutter; I beheld a face among the leaves: two wild eyes were staring at me. Then I saw naked chests, arms, legs and eyes; the understory was swarming with restless figures. The leaves trembled and rustled; they fired arrows at us; I closed the shutter. ‘Keep it straight’, I said to the panic-stricken helmsman angrily, ‘and calm down!’ I was spitting in the wind. I rushed outside. The deck was resounding with infuriated footsteps. A voice screamed: ‘Take cover!’ I caught sight of another ripple. The white men were shooting at the bushes. The air was filled with smoke: I couldn’t see the ripple anymore. I positioned myself in the doorway: it was raining arrows. They may have been poisoned, but it seemed that they couldn’t kill a cat. The attackers started to

howl. A shot coming from behind deafened me. I turned around: the helmsman had let go of the steering wheel and was firing his rifle. I ordered him to get back to work; he did not obey me. I rushed to the steering wheel; the boat was charging at a big rock; I steered the boat to the shore, for there was more water there.

The branches whipped the ship. The guns fell silent. A projectile whizzed through the cabin. The helmsman had run out of bullets; he was shaking the gun and yelling. I caught sight of evanescent shapes running. A big object appeared in front of the shutter; the helmsman dropped the gun, gave me a strange look and fell to the floor. His head hit the steering wheel twice. The end of the big object, which was a long stick, knocked over a stool. I thought that he had tried to catch it and had lost his balance. The smoke lifted; there was no more rock: I could move away from the bank in a hundred yards or so. I felt something warm and wet on my feet. I looked down: the helmsman was on his back, staring at me. His hands were still holding the stick. Actually, it was a spear that had pierced his chest. My shoes were covered with his blood; his eyes were gleaming. The crew started to fire again. He looked at me anxiously; his hands were clutching the spear as if it had been something precious he did not want me to remove. I forced

myself to stop looking at him and to keep steering the ship. I grasped the string of the tin whistle. I pulled it several times; it whistled nervously. The black warriors stopped yelling; it was replaced by a heartbreaking cry of despair coming from the forest. The bushes murmured; the arrows surrendered to the stillness of the ceasefire. I was turning the steering wheel when the angry man in pink pajamas entered and said: 'The manager wants you to… Good Lord!…' He saw the helmsman covered in blood and stopped speaking.

The black man's gleaming eyes were staring at us. I thought that he would ask us a question in an incomprehensible language, but he died without uttering a word. At the last moment, he frowned, which made his face look angry and threatening. His inquisitorial eyes turned glassy. 'Can you steer?', I asked the pink turkey. He did not answer me. I grabbed his arm; he realized that he was going to steer the boat. To tell you the truth, I was anxious to change my shoes and socks. 'He is dead', murmured the potbellied man. 'There is no doubt about it,' I said, tugging at my shoelaces; 'I suppose that Mr. Kurtz is also dead now.'

That was my chief preoccupation then. I was a knight of the Round Table who did not want his Holy Grail to vanish into thin air. I

longed to talk with Kurtz. Talk with… I flung one shoe overboard and realized that I was obsessed with Kurtz. In my mind, he was an echo, not a real man who worked. I knew, of course, that he collected a lot of ivory, but that wasn't the point. The point was that he was a wise man with whom you could talk. His witticisms turned the languor of the forest into sunbeams or deceitful shadows.

I flung my other shoe into that bloody river and said to myself: 'It's over. It's too late. He is dead; his secrets have been killed by a spear, an arrow, a sword. I will never hear him speak.' Like the savages howling in the forest, I felt sad. I had lost my *raison d'être*. Why are you sighing? You think this is absurd. Well, it's absurd! Give me some tobacco… Marlow fell silent. A match flared; his face appeared: he looked haggard. The match went out.

'Absurd!', he cried. This is unfair… You are in good health, you have a good job and a nice house: you are in no position to judge me. I threw a new pair of shoes overboard because I was angry, but I did not cry. I was disappointed that I would not listen to Kurtz. I was wrong, of course: all hope was not lost. He was little more than a voice, and I could hear it; I could also hear the voice of the girl…

He was silent for a long time.

‘Was his wisdom a lie?’, he asked suddenly. The girl! Why did I mention the girl? That is not relevant. Women do not belong to that world; they have got theirs, which is much prettier than ours. You should have heard Mr. Kurtz say: ‘Honey.’ You would have realized that it sounded weird. And his head! They say that hair keeps growing after death, but he was bald. Life in the forest had made him lose his hair: his head was as smooth as an ivory ball. Ivory! Heaps of ivory, stacks of ivory. We couldn’t even close the doors of the old shanty. You would have thought that there wasn’t a tusk left anywhere in the country. ‘It is fossilized ivory,’ remarked the manager. It wasn’t fossilized ivory; it had just stayed a few months in the ground. The natives buried it sometimes, but they couldn’t bury it deep enough to save Mr. Kurtz from his fate. We filled the steamboat with tusks and had to pile the rest on the deck. He enjoyed looking at it. He used to say: ‘My ivory.’ Yes, I heard him say: ‘My girl, my ivory, my station, my river, my...’ Everything belonged to him. I wanted the forest to laugh at him, for nothing belonged to him. As a matter of fact, it was he who belonged to the forest and its barbarity. He was an evil spirit. But you cannot understand: your petit bourgeois mentality prevents you from acknowledging

the harshness of life in the virgin forest. Solitude vitiates the strongest souls, for there is nobody to keep you on the straight and narrow. Hence, you rely solely on your inner strength. You are going to tell me that righteous people exist. Maybe, but there are not so many saints on earth: most people are… well, human beings! I'm not trying to excuse Mr. Kurtz's behaviour. I'm just trying to understand him. Fortunately, this ghost confided in me before he disappeared. This was because he could speak English. Kurtz had gone to school in England and his mother was half-English. As for his father, he was half-French. Europe had educated him. I learned that the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had asked him to write a report so that they might implement a new plan. He wrote it; I read it. It was eloquent but a bit over the top. He had found time to write seventeen pages. I guess that it was before his 'health problems' led him to host witches' Sabbaths, if you know what I mean… Anyway, it was a beautiful text, even though the opening paragraph was ominous. He stated that black people regarded white people as demigods, which compelled us to behave like demigods in order to control them. It was exhilarating, but I don't really remember all the details. It lead people to believe that Africa was ruled by friendly white men. It was brilliantly written. The musicality of the

words was not overshadowed by any piece of advise. However, on the last page, he had added a footnote which explained what good governance was. It was a set of simple ideas which aimed to help the natives thanks to a terrifying belief: ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’ He never forgot this piece of writing, for, when he came to his senses, he asked me to take good care of his pamphlet, as he called it, which, according to him, would be helpful for his career. I was in the loop; besides, I felt compelled to take an interest in his life. After all, I should have thrown away his papers. But, you see, history always rummages in the trash cans. This man was one of a king. He used to manipulate people. He had at least one true friend who was neither stupid nor selfish. I will never forget him even though I reproach him for being the cause of my helmsman’s death. I miss him. This grain of black sand inhabited my white Sahara. Work brings people together; solitude binds them together. His glassy eyes keep looking at me.

Poor fool! If only he hadn’t opened the shutter. He was as free as a bird, just like Kurtz. I put my slippers on, closed my eyes, removed the spear, opened my eyes again and dragged his body out. He was so heavy that I had great difficulty throwing him overboard. The current carried him away like a wisp of straw; the corpse rolled over

twice and was swallowed by the hungry river. The manager and all the employees were on the deck; angry murmurs reached my ears: I would have acted too quickly. Did they want to embalm it and sing a requiem? The native woodcutters also complained, but I had decided to feed the fishes, not human beings! I did not want this bad helmsman's body to cause a food riot. Besides, I was anxious to steer the boat, for the agent in pink pajamas was doing a bad job.

I set my hands on the wheel. The ship was in the middle of the river, it was going half speed. I heard some people say that Kurtz was dead and that they had burnt the station. The red-headed man exclaimed: 'Kurtz's death has been avenged: we have kicked their asses in the bush.' It has to be said that he had almost fainted when he had seen the bloodied helmsman. I couldn't help saying: 'It's true, you made a lot of smoke!' I had seen that they closed their eyes when they fired. Hence, they always missed the target. Actually, our attackers ran away because of the noise of the tin whistle. That's what I told them; they yelled at the top of their voices.

The manager was next to me. He asked me to speed up. All of a sudden, I caught sight of a building in a clearing on the riverbank. 'What's this?' I asked. He clapped

his hands in amazement and cried: ‘The station at last!’ I steered the boat to the shore.

I looked through my telescope and saw a hill with little vegetation. There was a building in ruins on top; it was surrounded by tall grass; the roof had almost disappeared. Six posts surmounted by spheres indicated that there had been a fence once. The forest wasn’t far away. There was also a white man who was waving his arms restlessly. I beheld figures that were moving in the nearby wood. I stopped the engine; the ship slowly approached the land. The manager yelled: ‘We’ve been attacked.’ ‘I know, I know’, answered the man cheerfully, ‘everything is alright now.’

His outfit reminded me of something funny I had seen once. As we came near him, I realized that he resembled a jester. He was wearing a diamond-patterned multicolored costume. His clean-shaven boyish white face displayed blue gleaming eyes and a radiant smile that could have eclipsed the sun itself. ‘Watch out, captain!’, he cried, ‘there’s a snag over there.’ ‘Another snag!’, I exclaimed; ‘I nearly sank my boat last night.’ The jester looked at me and asked: ‘Are you English?’ ‘No, I am not’, I retorted, ‘I am a sailor: the sea is my country.’ He stopped smiling and shook his head. Then his face lit

up. ‘Never mind!’, he cried. ‘Are we in time?’, I asked. ‘He is on the top of the hill’, he replied sadly. His face was like the autumn sky: moody.

The manager and the crew, armed to the teeth, went ashore. The young man came aboard. ‘I don’t like that’, I said, ‘I saw people in the bushes.’ He told me that everything was alright. ‘They are simple people,’ he added; ‘I am happy to see you. It took me quite some time to keep them away from me.’ ‘But you said that everything was OK!’, I interjected. ‘Oh, they don’t want to attack us’, he said. I looked daggers at him; he added: ‘Not again!’ Then he cheered up. ‘Your cabin needs a good cleanup’, he remarked. Then he told me to be ready to blow the whistle in case of trouble. ‘One good screech will work better than all your rifles. They are simple people.’ His logorrhea made me feel dizzy. ‘Do you talk with Mr. Kurtz sometimes?’, I inquired. ‘You don’t talk with that man, you listen to him,’ he answered. He lighted his pipe and continued: ‘Brother... sailor… honor... pleasure... delight... introduce myself... Russian… son of an archpriest... city of Tambov... What? Tobacco! English tobacco! That’s very kind of you! Smoking? All sailors smoke.’

The pipe calmed him down. His gibberish meant that he had run away from school in order to join the Imperial Russian Navy. Since he did not like the military life, he had deserted and had served on several English ships. He emphasized that he was reconciled with his father the archpriest. ‘When you are young, you must explore the world, open your mind, and broaden your horizons’, he said. ‘Here?’, I asked. ‘You can never tell. I met Mr. Kurtz here,’ he replied reproachfully. I fall silent. He had convinced a Dutch trading company located on the coast to give him some goods to sell in the interior. He had been wandering along the river for two years, cut off from everybody and everything. ‘I’m not as young as I look. I’m twenty-five,’ he said. ‘At first, Mr. Van Shuyten told me to go to hell, but I pestered him for merchandise, which led him to gave me some cheap things and guns. I sent him a few tusks a year ago to thank him. I hope he got it. Did you find the wood I left for you down the river? That was my old house.’

I gave him Towson’s book. He was overjoyed. ‘I thought that I had lost it,’ he said; ‘there are so many imponderables when you travel alone. Canoes tip over, people get upset…’ He leafed through the book. ‘Are the notes written in Russian?’, I inquired. He nodded. ‘I thought it was a sort of code.’ He laughed, then he suddenly

became serious. ‘I found it difficult to keep them away from me,’ he said. ‘Did they try to kill you?’, I asked. ‘Oh, of course not,’ he answered. ‘So why did they attack us?’, I continued. ‘They don’t want him to go’, he replied. ‘They don’t?’, I asked. He nodded mysteriously and said: ‘That man has broadened my horizons.’

CHAPTER III.

I looked at him in bewilderment. He resembled a clown lost in the very middle of nowhere. His existence was improbable, but he was in front of me. ‘I went a little farther into the jungle,’ he said; ‘then even farther. I was thus unable to come back. Never mind! I have plenty of time, I will manage. Take Kurtz away… be quick!’ The freshness of youth accentuated his tragic situation. For months and years, his life had been worthless, but he was still alive: he seemed indestructible. I was bedazzled and a bit jealous too. Youth urged him on; it kept him safe. He wanted the forest to give him a place to live in. He did not ask for preferential treatment. He was a true adventurer. I envied him his inner flame. He was so modest that, even while he was talking to you, you forgot that he really was the person who had gone through all those things. However, I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz. He did not know why he venerated him; he just regarded it as an obvious fact. I considered that it was self-deception.

They drifted together like two drunken boats heading towards the Promised Land, and they landed at last. I guess that Kurtz wanted an audience: he was the prophet, the

Russian was his disciple. ‘We talked about everything,’ he said enthusiastically, ‘I did not want to go to bed; hours felt like seconds. We talked about love too.’ ‘Ah, he told you about love!’, I said amusingly. ‘It isn’t what you think,’ he cried. ‘It was in general. He made me see… things.’

He raised his arms. We were on the deck. The chief of the woodcutter turned to him. I looked around: the land, the river, the jungle and the sky had never been so dark, sad, incomprehensible, and cruel. ‘Have you seen him ever since?’, I asked.

He told me that he had not seen him in a long time. He had nursed him through two serious illnesses, but, since he was a lone wolf, he had left the station after his recovery. ‘I had to wait for days before he showed up,’ he said; ‘but it was worth waiting for… sometimes.’ ‘Was he exploring?’, I inquired. ‘Oh, yes, of course,’ he answered; ‘he discovered many villages and even one lake.’ Since it was a risky business, he had not told him where they were. His expeditions aimed to find ivory, of course. ‘But he didn’t have anything to trade for the ivory,’ I interjected. ‘We have got lots of cartridges,’ he said, gazing at me. ‘So Kurtz pillaged the country,’ I exclaimed. He nodded. ‘He wasn’t alone’, he said, ‘he alluded to the villages around that lake.’ I

suggested that the natives were his henchmen. He fidgeted a little. ‘They adored him,’ he said. What a bad justification! He wanted to talk about Kurtz, but, at the same time, he did not want to disclose secrets. ‘What did you expect?’, he cried; ‘They had never seen guns before. It was magical. Besides, he could be rough sometimes. You can’t judge Mr. Kurtz according to the criteria you would use to judge an ordinary man. No, you can’t. Let me give you an example. once, he aimed his rifle at me! But I don’t want to judge him...’ ‘Why did he do that?’, I asked. ‘Well, the chief of the village where I lived had given me a few tusks, for I used to hunt for them. Kurtz wanted the ivory. He told me that he would shoot at me if I did not give him the tusks and left the country. He added that he would do that just because he enjoyed it and because nobody could prevent him from doing so, and it was true too. I gave him the ivory. I did not care. But I didn’t leave. No, I couldn’t leave him. I had to be careful until we made up. That was when he got sick for the second time. Then I had to stay away, but I didn’t mind. He lived in the villages located near the lake. When he came down to the river, sometimes he was friendly and sometimes I had to keep out of his way. He suffered a lot. He hated all this, but he couldn’t get away. I begged him to leave; I offered to accompany him. He said yes, but then he went on an expedition in

order to find more ivory. He used to disappear for weeks; he forgot himself.' 'Does it mean that he suffered from a mental disorder?', I inquired. He took offense at the question. Mr. Kurtz couldn't be crazy. If I had heard him talk two days ago, I would have never dared to say such a thing... I picked up my telescope and scanned the edge of the forest. I knew that there were people out there; it made me feel nervous. Was the Russian's story true? The silent, motionless forest did not want to give me a clue. The young man told me that Mr. Kurtz had only recently come down to the river, bringing along many warriors. He had been gone for several months; I assume that the false prophet was looking for more followers. He came down unexpectedly in order to raid the region: ivory destroys wisdom. Then he fell ill. 'I heard he was sick. So I went to meet him,' said he; 'he was sick, very sick.' I looked at the house: there were no signs of life. I focused the telescope on one of the fence posts. Oh my Gosh! The round ornament was... the head of a man! I looked at the other posts: they were also surmounted by shrunken heads. I slowly moved the telescope back to the first one. It was black, dried, with hollow cheeks. The eyelids were closed; the lips displayed a narrow white line of teeth; it was sleeping on top of that post. Six smiling heads were

taunting the unbearable dampness of the forest.

I am not disclosing trade secrets here. In fact, the manager told me later that Mr. Kurtz's methods had ruined the district. I don't know why he had placed those heads there. They only showed Mr. Kurtz's lack of self-restraint: the glorious facade concealed the barbaric drives of Mr. Hyde. Was he aware of his monstrosity? I think that he discovered his vicious nature at the end, not before. The jungle had not been fooled, which was why it had taken revenge on him: his presence disturbed its virginal stillness. The emerald entity murmured things about himself that he didn't know. The whisper echoed loudly within his shallow consciousness... I lowered my telescope. The head was much closer; however, it seemed that it had stepped backwards!

Kurtz's admirer was upset. He told me that he had not dared to remove these 'symbols'. He did not fear the natives, for they would not move without Kurtz's explicit instructions. They lived around the station; their chiefs came every day to see Kurtz. They used to crawl... 'I don't want to hear about their antics,' I yelled. It may sound strange, but I thought that those details would be more shocking than the grimacing heads. He stared at me in amazement. It did

not occurred to him that I didn’t idolize Mr. Kurtz. He forgot that I had never heard his emotional perorations about love, justice, and good behaviour... I didn’t subscribe to his so-called wisdom. According to him, those heads belonged to rebels. I burst out laughing. Rebels! They didn’t look very rebellious on their sticks. ‘Kurtz’s life is an ordeal’, cried the dying man’s last disciple. ‘What about yours?’, I asked. ‘I? I’m a simple man. I don’t want people to help me. You cannot compare me to…’ He broke down in tears. ‘I don’t understand,’ he groaned; ‘I’ve been trying to keep him alive. That’s all. I didn’t have anything to do with this. We lacked medicine and food. They abandoned him: a man like him, a genius. It’s a shame, a shame… I haven’t slept for ten nights...’

His voice faded away. The shadows of the trees were nibbling the ramshackle cabin, the shrunken heads, and my bafflement. The river was slipping into a sparkling slumber. There was nobody on the shore. The bushes did not rustle.

All of a sudden, a group of men emerged from behind the house. They were carrying a homemade stretcher. A shrill cry broke the silence. Streams of naked men carrying spears, bows and shields poured in the clearing. The bushes shook; the grass swayed; then everything stopped moving.

‘If he says the wrong thing to them, we are done for,’ said the Russian. The group of men carrying the stretcher froze. The emaciated man on the stretcher sat up and raised his harm. ‘I hope that the man who keeps talking about love will find a reason to spare our lives,’ I said bitterly. I couldn’t hear anything, but, through my telescope, I saw his jaws move, his arm wave, his eyes blaze, and his head nod nervously. Kurtz, doesn’t it mean ‘short’ in German? His name was as true as everything else in his life: he was at least seven feet tall! His blanket fell off: his body was an ivory skeleton threatening a group of ebony men with his bones. His cannibalistic jaws wanted to devour them all. I heard the sound of his voice: he was vociferating. He fell back into the stretcher. The men who carried him resumed walking. The other men disappeared into thin air as if they had been breathed in by the jungle.

Some of the employees were carrying the guns of that pathetic Jupiter: two shotguns, a heavy rifle and a revolver. The manager was walking beside him; he was talking to him. On board, they put him in one of the little cabins on the deck. We had placed his mail on his bed. His trembling hand rummaged through the pile of envelopes. I was struck by his gleaming eyes

and his relaxed countenance. He did not seem to be in pain. This specter looked calm and almost happy.

He seized one of the letters, looked at me and said: ‘I am glad.’ He had heard about me! My friends at court were indiscreet, indeed. His voice was strong, deep and clear even though he barely moved his lips. The breathless skeleton had enough strength left to kill us all.

The manager appeared in the doorway; I stepped out; he drew the curtain. The crew members were watching the Russian, who was staring at the shore. What was he looking at?

I beheld dark figures in the distance, near the edge of the forest: two muscular warriors were leaning on spears. A gorgeous woman moved from right to left along the shore.

She walked majestically. Her fringed outfit revealed her sculptural beauty. Her braided hair resembled the bronze helmet of Athena Pallas. She wore brass leggings and epaulets as well as a great many necklaces made of glass beads and strange charms. A beauty spot adorned her cheek. Her jewelry must have been worth several elephant tusks. She was savage and superb, wild and

magnificent. Her ethereal stroll foretold a frightening outcome. Mother Nature, silent and thoughtful, looked at her and saw the reflection of her own Stygian soul.

She came next to the boat, stopped and faced us. Her long shadow stopped at the edge of the river. She halted. A whole minute passed; then she took a step forward and stopped again. She stood irresolute in front of us. The Russian growled; the crew members murmured. She stared at us. Suddenly, she raised her arms as though she was trying to touch the sky. The shadows of the trees swooped down on the boat. Everything was silent.

She turned away slowly, walked along the bank and entered the forest. She looked back at me; our eyes met; then she disappeared.

'If she had tried to come aboard, I think that I would have shot her,' said the Russian; 'I've been trying to keep her out of the house for the past two weeks. She got in once and made a scene, for she did not want me to patch my clothes with the rags I had picked up in the storeroom. It is true that I wasn't dressed appropriately. I guess that's the reason why she had an argument with Kurtz: she kept pointing at me. I don't understand her language. Fortunately, Kurtz was too sick

to listen to her. I don't understand... It's too much for me. Well, it's over now.'

I heard Kurtz's deep voice behind the curtain. 'Save me! ... You should save the ivory instead. Don't tell me you're going to save me. That's not what I have planned. Sick? I'm not that Sick! Never mind. I'll come back and carry out my plans. I'll show you what can be done. You with all of your silly ideas. Don't interfere in my business. I'll come back. I...'

The manager left the room and took me aside. 'He is very sick, very very sick,' he said; 'we have done everything we could for him, haven't we? But Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the company. He doesn't understand that we must be cautious. We must stop operating in this district for a while. We will lose money, of course. There is a lot of fossilized ivory. We must save it. But our position is untenable, for his methods are unsound.' 'His methods are unsound?', I repeated. 'Without a doubt,' he retorted. 'There are no methods', I whispered. 'Exactly!', he said triumphantly. 'I knew this would happen. He is ... almost insane! I will have to tell them.' 'The brickmaker will help you to write a convincing report', I said. He looked surprised. 'That being said, Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man,' I went on. He looked

daggers at me and said composedly: ‘He was…’ Then he turned away. I was lumped together with Kurtz: I was seen as a man with unsound methods, a lunatic maybe. But, at least, I could choose which nightmare I wanted to have.

Kurtz could go to hell: I didn’t care. I turned to the forest. For a moment, I felt as if I were carried away by the sinful Styx. I could hardly breathe: rot, corruption and vice were suffocating me. The Russian tapped my shoulder. He mumbled something like: ‘Seaman… couldn’t conceal… matters that would tarnish Mr. Kurtz’s reputation.’ I waited. In his eyes, Kurtz was immortal. Hence, things would get better. ‘Well!’, I said at last, ‘Say something. I’m Mr. Kurtz’s friend, in a way.’

Since we had the same profession, he agreed to confide in me. He told me that the employees spoke ill of him. ‘You are right,’ I said, ‘the manager thinks that you should be hanged.’ ‘I should go away quickly,’ he remarked; ‘I can’t do anything for Kurtz now. No one will stop them from killing me. There’s a military post three hundred miles from here.’ ‘Then you should go’, I said; ‘if you have any friends among the natives, they could help you.’ ‘I don’t want people to help me’, he retorted; ‘I don’t hate those white men, but I have to protect Mr. Kurtz’s

reputation. Since you're a seaman...' 'All right,' said I, 'You can trust me: I won't disclose any secret.' I, of course, kept my word.

He lowered his voice and told me that it was Kurtz who had ordered the attack on our boat. He did not want to be taken away. 'I don't understand these things', said he, 'I'm just a simple man, but he believed that you would go away since you would assume that he was dead. I couldn't stop him. It's been awful for the past month.' 'Well, he's all right now,' I said. He asked me to keep my mouth shot and added: 'It would be awful for his reputation if anybody here...' I promised him that I would never tell anyone. 'Three natives with a canoe are waiting for me, not very far from here. I'm leaving. Could you give me a few cartridges?' I handed him a box discreetly. He also took a handful of my tobacco and winked at me. He headed towards the door, turned around and asked: 'Could you give me a pair of shoes?' He showed me his worn-out shoes; I gave him an old pair. 'I'll never meet a man of his caliber again,' he continued; 'you should have heard him recite poems... his own poems!... You know, he enlightened me!' We shook hands and he vanished in the night. Sometimes I question his existence: people like him do not exist!

When I woke up, just after midnight, I looked around cautiously. A big fire was burning on the hill, illuminating a part of the house. One of the crew members was guarding the ivory, helped by a group of armed natives. Deeper in the forest, red gleams indicated the location of the camp of the worshipers of Kurtz. A monotonous drumbeat accompanied mesmerizing chants that resembled the buzzing produced by hornets. I was about to doze off when frightening yells woke me up. They stopped immediately; the buzzing resumed. I glanced into the small cabin. A light was burning, but Mr. Kurtz was not there.

I would have called for help if I had acknowledged what I had seen. First, I was dubious: it was so improbable. Then I realized that we could be attacked. This possibility did not frighten me. In fact, it was a relief.

There was a white man who was sleeping in a chair, on the deck, three feet from me. The yells had not awakened him. I let him sleep and leaped ashore. I didn’t betray Mr. Kurtz. I had to remain loyal to the nightmare I had chosen. I wanted to confront this shadow in private.

As soon as I got on the bank, I saw a broad trail through the grass. I knew that I

would catch him easily since he was crawling. I strode across the wet grass. I fancied giving him a beating. Some crazy thoughts crossed my mind: the lady and her knitting, a white man firing at the bushes, and I wandering the forest for the rest of my life. I confused the beat of the drum with the beat of my heart; its speed enabled me to identify my mistake.

I stopped to listen. The night was clear; the vault of heaven illuminated the pearly mist. I saw something moving ahead. I felt confident that night. I moved away from the trail in order to follow that shadow. It was a treasure hunt, and Kurtz was the treasure.

I found it; the runaway vapor rose to its feet. The forest was murmuring. It was a dangerous spot. What would happen if he shouted? Though he could hardly stand up, his voice was strong. ‘Go away, hide yourself,’ he said in a deep tone. It was awful. I looked back: we were thirty yards away from the nearest camp. A tall black man was swinging his arms. He had antelope horns on his head. I guess that he was a sorcerer, but he didn’t seem to be aggressive. ‘Do you know what you’re doing?’, I whispered. ‘Perfectly,’ he answered. ‘If he calls out, I am dead,’ I said to myself. How could I bring him back to his senses?

‘I had grand plans,’ he muttered. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘but if you shout, I will beat you with… I will throttle you!’ ‘I was on the verge of achieving great things’, he went on, ‘but this stupid scoundrel…’ ‘Why don’t you return to Europe?,’ said I in order to try to break the spell that enchained him to his monstrous drives, which compelled him to remain on the fringes of society, reason and humanity. His barbarity frightened me, all the more so because I knew that no sensible word could lessen his vices. Like the natives, I had to deal with his grandiose self-perception. He was alone and defenseless, but I felt dizzy: his world and mine were whirling in my head. Strange as it may seem, he was not out of his mind although he kept talking about himself. However, his soul was mad: the solitary jungle had begotten a monster. I was being punished for my sins; my faith in humanity was being questioned by his crazy sincerity. His soul was a battlefield: the lack of restraint, faith and fear had been torturing him since childhood. I put him on my back and carried him to the boat. He was not much heavier than a child, but it seemed that I was carrying half a ton on my back. I put him down on the bed, in the cabin: my legs were shaking.

The following day at noon, when we left, the natives came out of the woods;

hundreds of muscular, naked black men occupied the clearing. Two thousand eyes saw the noisy departure of the steamboat. Three men wearing horns and covered with red mud positioned themselves in front of the ship. Then they danced, shaking black feathers, a piece of fox fur and a dried gourd. The words they spoke did not resemble a true language. The crowd chanted a kind of Satanic prayer.

Kurtz was lying on the camp bed and looking out of the window. The hubbub increased: the sculptural woman with the braided hair rushed to the river's edge. She held out her hands and shouted something; the mob's shouts accompanied hers.

'Do you understand this?', I asked.

His infuriated eyes kept scanning the shore. His lips twitched. 'I do', he answered slowly.

The white men picked up their rifles; I pulled the string to blow the whistle; the natives jumped with fright. 'Don't scare them away,' said one of the employees dolefully. I pulled the string over and over again; they panicked and ran off. The three men covered in mud threw themselves to the ground. The tall woman stretched her bare arms toward us.

Then the stupid white men started firing; I couldn’t see anything through the smoke.

The black current snatched us away from the heart of darkness. Kurtz’s tormented soul was fleeing from its darkest depths. The manager was satisfied with this result. As for the crew members, they wished that I were dead. It’s strange how I accepted this partnership with the chthonic forces of nature and mankind.

Kurtz kept talking. His delusions of grandeur kept harassing him. Sometimes he acted childishly. He wanted kings to meet him on his return in order to dazzle them with his exploits. The river did not care: it licked the hull reluctantly; the jungle did not care: it looked at this piece of barbarity contemptuously. ‘Close the shutter,’ said Kurtz; ‘I can’t stand that.’ I closed it. ‘I will devour your heart!’, he shouted at the forest; it laughed at him.

As I expected, the boat broke down: we had to land on a small island in order to repair the engine. This delay shook Kurtz’s confidence. He handed me a packet of papers and a photograph. ‘Keep this for me,’ he said. ‘That bloody manager will rummage in my boxes when I am away.’ In the

afternoon, I heard him say to himself: ‘Live rightly or die…’ Was he rehearsing a speech in his sleep, or was it a phrase from one of his articles?

He looked like a man lying at the bottom of a cliff where the sun never shines. I couldn’t spend a lot of time with him, for I had to help the mechanic. I was besieged by rust, engine oil, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers and drills; what a mess! I worked until I shook so badly that I couldn’t stand.

One evening, I came into the cabin with a candle and heard him say: ‘I am lying here in the dark, waiting for death.’ I forced myself to say that it was nonsense, but I leaned closer to him to see whether all this was real or not.

I was entranced by the ivory veil that was slowly covering his pathological pride, ruthlessness, fears and despair. Was he reliving his life and experiencing the same ecstasy or frustration? I assume that he saw something in his dream which compelled him to whisper: ‘Horror! Horror!’

I blew out the candle and left the cabin. The employees were in the dining room. I sat opposite the manager, but I did not look at him. He leaned back; his malicious lips grinned. Small flies kept landing on our

sweaty cheeks. Suddenly, the insolent servant poked his head out and said: ‘Mr. Kurtz is dead.’

All the white men rushed out; I continued eating. I feel certain that they thought that I was heartless. Actually, there was a lamp in the dinning room, whereas there was none outside. I didn’t go near the genius who had already judged his deeds. His voice had faded away; the others would bury his remains on the following morning. They would have liked to bury me too.

I considered the nightmare I had chosen in order to show that I was loyal to Kurtz. Man spends his life trying to know himself, but it comes too late: when you are full of regrets. I fought death. It is the most unexciting battle you can imagine. You don’t want to win; you don’t mind loosing. In fact, you don’t know who is right or wrong. Life is such a mysterious thing! I was facing death and was unable to say something intelligent. That is why I believe that Kurtz was a great man. He had ideas and expressed them. Since I have looked over the edge, I understand now the meaning of his gaze: he could not see the flame of the candle but was wise enough to perceive the desires of the people who lived in the darkness. He had stridden over the fence. I had not dared to do so. I guess the knowledge of the invisible

enlightens the soul: one should always cross the border. His shout was a profession of faith, a moral victory over abominable fears and drives. That is why I always remained loyal to him.

They did not bury me, but I cannot really remember what happened next. I returned to London. People were still running in the streets to steal money from one another. They ate disgusting food, drink disgusting beer, and lived disgusting lives. I felt sure they did not know the things I knew. Their behavior, which was simply the normal behavior of ordinary people going to work, appalled me. Anyway, I didn't want to enlighten them; I just laughed at them. I suppose I did not feel good; no, I did not feel good about myself. I kept Kurtz's papers, but I didn't know what to do with them. On one occasion, a clean-shaven man wearing gold-rimmed spectacles approached me about 'Kurtz's documents.' I wasn't surprised, since I had argued with the manager about them when we were still on the boat. I had refused to give information. I treated that man in the same way. Hence, he threatened me and said that the company needed to know its 'territories.' I told him that Mr. Kurtz had explored worlds that did not belong to the company. He alluded to science; I offered him Kurtz's report on *The Suppression of Savage Customs*; he refused

to take it. He was disappointed, for he wanted the letters. He told me that he would sue me and left. I never saw him again. Two days later, Kurtz's cousin met me so that I might tell him what I knew about his dear cousin's death. I learned that Kurtz was a great musician. I thought he was a painter who wrote articles for newspapers. However, we both regarded him as a genius. I gave him some unimportant letters Kurtz had written to his family. Finally, a journalist contacted me. He wanted me to tell him the whole story. According to him, Kurtz was a bad writer but a gifted orator. He electrified the audience. He could have been the leader of an extremist political party. He asked if I knew why Kurtz had been there. I did not answer, but I gave him the report on *The Suppression of Savage Customs.* He skimmed through it, mumbled, said that he would certainly publish it and went away.

Consequently, I kept the packet of letters and the picture of the pretty girl. I resolved to find the lady in order to give her the letters and her portrait. Kurtz's soul, body, station, plans, ivory and career had disappeared. All that was left of him was his memory and his 'fiancée': I wanted the past to take possession of those things so that they might sink into oblivion, which is man's fate.

I thought that his memory would fade away rapidly, but I caught sight of his reflection in a windowpane while I was walking on the street. His cannibalistic mouth was ready to devour mankind. I started to run; the monstrous flicker ran after me. The drumbeat, the yells, the jungle, his shadow, the obedient worshipers and my messed-up mind entered a house. The oppressive wilderness had defeated me. His bewitching voice and his vile desires persecuted me. The word *ivory* kept echoing inside my head. The greedy phantom that had stolen it wanted to keep it. What for? Redeem his soul! I rang the bell. I was in front of a mahogany door; I could see him staring at me from the glass panel in the door. I heard: 'Horror! Horror!'

The night was falling. I waited in a room with high ceilings and three long windows that looked like phosphorescent columns. The pieces of furniture were gleaming. The marble fireplace was as white as snow. A black grand piano that resembled a coffin was beckoning to me. A door opened and closed. I rose to my feet.

Pale as death, clad in black, she came near me. More than a year had elapsed since his death, but she was still in mourning. She took my hands in hers and said: 'I knew that you would come.' She was neither young nor

old. Our eyes met: she beheld my unbalanced depths, I saw her marmoreal sorrow. She murmured: 'I have survived'; at that very instant, I heard Kurtz utter the same words! I asked myself why I had come to that mysterious place. We sat down; I handed her the packet of letters. 'You knew him well,' she murmured.

'People become friends very quickly out there,' I said.

'Did you admire him? It was impossible to know him without admiring him. Was it?'

'He was a great man. It was impossible not to...'

'... Love him. This is true! But no one knew him as well as I did! I knew all his secrets. I knew him so well.'

'You knew him very well, indeed.'

'You were his friend. I thus think that I can speak to you. You heard his last words. You see, I loved him. According to him, I knew him better than anyone on earth. Since his mother died I have no one, no one... to... to...'

This girl kept talking. She talked like a drunkard who drinks liquor in order to ease

the pain. She told me that her engagement to Kurtz had upset her family. He wasn't rich enough, which was true.

'Everyone who heard him speak became his friend,' she went on; 'the good souls were mesmerized by him. 'But you know that, for you heard him speak.'

'Yes, I did.'

'What a loss to me… to us, I mean. I have been very happy, very lucky, very proud. Too lucky and too happy, I suppose. Now I'll be unhappy for the rest of my life. His dreams, greatness, mind and noble heart have vanished. Nothing remains but a memory. You and I…'

'We will always remember him.'

'His plans have disappeared too. What a pity! His words, at least, are still alive.'

'His words will remain.'

'And his exemplary life. People venerated him. His goodness was visible in everything he did. His exemplary…'

'This is true, I had forgotten his exemplary life.'

‘But I can’t, I just can’t believe that I will never see him again; nobody will never see him again, never, never, never. … He died as he lived.’

‘His death resembled his life, indeed.’

‘And I wasn’t with him.’

‘We did everything we could to…’

‘I believed in him more than in anyone on earth, more than in his mother, more than… in himself. He needed me! Yes, me! I would have treasured every sigh, every word, every sign, every glance.’

I felt a chill hand on my chest. ‘Don’t,’ I said.

‘Pardon me! I have cried in silence so long. You were with him at the end? He must have been so lonely.’

‘I was with him; I heard his very last words…’

‘What did he say? I want… I want something to live with.’

The little voice in my head yelled: ‘Horror! Horror!’

‘What did he say?’, she continued. ‘I loved him, I adored him.’

‘The last word he pronounced was… your name.’

‘I knew it… I was sure!’

I heard her cry. She hid her face in her hands. I felt desperate. Honestly, I couldn’t tell her the truth. It would have been too dark… too dark…’

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Marlow stopped talking, sat silently on the floor and got into the lotus position. Nobody moved. ‘We are running late,’ said the director suddenly. I looked aside. Anyway, lots of clouds prevented them from seeing the dreadful river that led to the heart of darkness.